

THE LEGEND HERSELF: HOW GENDER PLAYS INTO THE PORTRAYAL OF
FEMININE CHARACTERS IN THE LEGEND OF ZELDA SERIES

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will be exploring the way that gender influences the writing of the characters in the *Legend of Zelda* series and what effects that it has on the portrayal of those characters and the stories they are a part of. I will examine some of the main characters such as Link, Princess Zelda, and Impa in order to analyze the ways in which gender expression affects their characterization in various installments of the *Zelda* series, including *The Legend of Zelda*, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*, and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.

DEDICATION

To my parents, for raising me to appreciate the nerdier things in life.

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I. Introduction

Video gaming is now a multi-billion-dollar industry, and it's only projected to continue growing as technology improves and becomes available to a wider audience. What once was exclusive to arcades has now become a pillar of entertainment in many modern homes. From expensive computers capable of running the newest games, to cutting-edge consoles, to expansive and adaptable mobile games, the video game industry has expanded to be more accessible than ever. Still, however, it is surrounded by the stigma that it is something created and marketed for male interest. Games are typically considered a "boyish" hobby, and as such stereotypes surrounding who plays video games often tends to exclude female audiences, even when they are the backbone of some of the biggest titles in video game history. This is reflected not only in the marketing of these games, but often in their design as well. Many video games took on male leads, while women were relegated to supporting roles or damsels in distress.

Despite the fact that women had a massive hand in the creation of some of the most influential video games to ever hit the market, and the fact that games and their consoles were once originally gender-neutral, there was a shift around 1983. During that time, adults had largely begun to lose interest in video games as a result of a flood of rushed, cheap games prominent at the time. Nintendo, when choosing how to market their new Nintendo Entertainment System, a console that would soon become the origin for some of the most iconic games known today, they chose to market it as a "toy" rather than as an "electronic." (Rossen, "How Nintendo Conquered"). However, since the "toy" section in most stores was divided by gender, this meant that Nintendo would have to choose whether to market their console towards boys or girls. Their decision would end

up shaping the gaming industry for decades to come. Three years later in 1986, with the game industry now defined as almost explicitly intended for “boys,” Nintendo would release its first “Zelda” game, *The Legend of Zelda*, on this Nintendo Entertainment System.

The original “Legend of Zelda” had a very simple premise. The player would play as a young boy named Link, who would adventure through the map, defeating enemies and collecting items until he was strong enough to defeat the evil Ganon and save Princess Zelda. Despite its simplicity, especially in comparison to games now, the game was a massive step forward for Nintendo. The game sold over 6.5 million copies and less than a year after the game’s initial release, a sequel was released. The series continued to remain popular, and as of 2017, there are 19 main titles in the series, with its most recent game, *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, selling over 14.27 million copies as the best-selling game in the franchise. (Kimishima, “Corporate Management Briefing”)

The Legend of Zelda series is unique in that the characters do not have one continuous storyline, but rather, a series of timelines in which the basics of their characters (usually name, general design, and personality) reoccur in similar archetypal roles. Typically, games revolve around the wielders of the Triforce, a sort of superhuman power granted by the gods, are in a sort of cycle of reincarnation where they each fulfill their role as the hero, the sage, and the villain, and struggle to keep the villain from obtaining the other two pieces of the whole Triforce. This means that the three most central characters are usually the hero, Link (wielder of the Triforce of Courage); the sage, Zelda (wielder of the Triforce of Wisdom); and the villain, Ganondorf (wielder of the Triforce of Power).

According to Hyrule's lore, three gods came together to form the world, each of them creating one third of the Triforce. When they were finished creating this world and departed from it, they entrusted the Triforce to Hylia and tasked her with protecting the world that they had created. When Demise (the entity that would become the first iteration of Ganondorf) threatened its safety, the goddess Hylia chose to take a mortal form so that the Triforce could be used. While in her mortal form, she also selected a chosen hero who would protect her. These three—Hylia, Demise, and the Hero—would come to be reincarnated into Zelda, Ganondorf, and Link, respectively.

These three are reborn throughout different timelines when the need for them is great. This creates a unique dynamic within the *Zelda* games, as the characters are not continuous, so they do not grow and adapt from game to game. But rather, it is more often the case that there has been some great span of time between games (if they are in the same timeline at all) and thus, each adventure is a unique world in which these familiar characters are placed. However, even when the characters have unique differences from the other versions of themselves, they are often still restricted by the archetypes from their original iterations, as they are "reincarnations" of those destinies. This leads to a unique dilemma where the characters in the *Zelda* series do not themselves return for every iteration of the game, however, they are expected to act a certain way based on how they have acted in their past versions. Beginning, notably, with the original "Legend of *Zelda*" game, which originated during a time in which games and their consoles were marketed almost exclusively to male audiences. This can be limiting to their character growth in that these characters are expected to maintain the same base

premise in each iteration of the game, even when it might create a more unique and interesting dynamic to have them fulfill a different role.

I must address that there is a misconception about writing strong female characters in not just video games, but in film and literature as well. Often, the word “strong” is construed to mean “masculine.” In other words, when there is a demand for “strong female characters,” what results, especially from male-dominated writing teams, are female characters who shun their femininity in favor of masculine traits. Physical strength, the ability to fight, and the lack of outward emotion are a few possible traits that could be assigned to these characters in order to make them “strong.” So, when making “strong” female characters, what some writers may produce is grizzled, muscular women, women who can shoot firearms or wield battle axes, and women who scoff at the idea of being like “other,” more traditionally feminine women.

However, not only are these traits extremely limiting if applied to allegedly well-written male characters, but they neglect the nuance of writing a strong female character. If the only way to make a female character strong is to have them neglect their femininity, then it is a step in the wrong direction. Female characters should not have to cast off their femininity in order to be strong, likeable characters. In fact, it may well be better for these characters-- both male and female --to embrace certain aspects of their femininity in order to be “strong.”

By saying this, I do not mean that the women characters should always be scantily clad, or wear high heels, or don makeup. While it is not wrong to enjoy these things, or even to write these things, keeping in mind practicality and circumstance is key. Writing a classic femme fatale character, a princess who wears nice dresses, or a businesswoman

who enjoys makeup, is not inherently wrong. By extension, enjoying these things or enjoying presenting one's own femininity in any of these ways is not inherently wrong. However, when we see these characters in the media, we must remember that they are not real women. They are not alive; they are not capable of making choices for themselves. Whenever we see a woman who has been written into a piece of media, we must remember that it was someone's choice to make her that way. And, more often than not, that means that a male writer chose to create a character who was appealing to his own gaze or to the gaze of a broader male audience. Therefore, it is understandable when a sly assassin goes undercover and dresses nicely to seduce men. However, when a super-powered woman wears heels to battle, when a grizzled survivalist somehow finds time to draw on eyeliner, or when a villain consistently speaks in low, sultry tones, these are choices that were made by a writer somewhere along the line. No amount of explaining, no amount of rationalizing from that character's point of view, is going to neglect the fact that a writer made them that way for a reason.

When I say that it would be better for characters to embrace aspects of femininity, I mean it in the sense that femininity in itself is not a weakness, not that all female characters should need to perform the more benign aspects of femininity. I'm referring to those more traditionally feminine traits of empathy, compassion, and diplomacy. Embracing aspects of femininity not only adds depth to female characters, but to male characters as well. It is not bad or weak for a character to be able to express their feelings, empathize with others, or be kind to their teammates. These are some examples of what could be considered typically "feminine" traits that should be embraced as strengths, rather than signs of a "weak" character. Female characters, in any writing, should be able

to embrace these aspects without being deemed lesser than their combat-oriented, anger-driven male counterparts.

Within the Zelda series, this is one aspect of gender presentation that is done well. While Link, the main character and the character that the player controls, exhibits many traditionally masculine strengths—he is, after all, the playable character in a game with heavy emphasis on combat and adventure—he is not the poster child of masculinity. Despite being physically strong and heavily combat based, his fighting style is mainly centered around outsmarting an opponent rather than beating them head-on with brute strength. Additionally, while he is the main protagonist of the game, he lacks much of the characterization and depth needed to make him a compelling character in his own right. Instead, he serves more as a vessel to allow the player into the world, where more complex characters can be found.

One of these more complex characters is Princess Zelda herself, after which the series is named. Zelda's personality can vary somewhat between games, but she usually exists as the wiser and more experienced counterpart to Link. In early iterations of the game, which typically didn't have strong storylines to begin with, Zelda existed only as a damsel for the player to rescue. However, over the course of the series, she has grown to have much more power and personality, especially visible in versions of the game where her personality is not stifled by the responsibilities as a woman and as a member of the royal family. However, while she has undoubtedly grown over the years, she is still often limited to her position as the damsel in distress that Link (the player) must at the end of the day save.

Another central character who popularly reoccurs in the series is the character Impa. However, since Impa is not in every game and is not one of the “main 3” cast, she tends to be allowed to have a more dynamic role depending on what the game calls for. She typically fulfills the role of Zelda’s bodyguard and acts as a mentor to both her and Link. However, while in some iterations she leans more heavily on her physical abilities, in others she almost entirely acts as a mentor, an elder full of wisdom for the main cast. Which role she takes up, and what form her gender expression subsequently takes, depends almost entirely on whether she is primarily serving Link, the male hero; or Zelda, the damsel in distress.

While it may seem to some that video games are a trivial aspect of our collective media experience, it is important to critique the ways in which we portray various identities in media. In the words of Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin:

“Most video games can... be considered as ‘technologies of gender,’ which contribute to reproducing, reinforcing, and naturalizing pre-existing beliefs about men and women. Like any other media form, video games play an important role in the construction of gender identities, which are not... bound to biological features, but socially established through the repetition of similar behaviors, bodily practices, and discourses” (Trépanier-Jobin 90).

In examining the *Legend of Zelda* series through the lens of these three characters, I will analyze a broader portrayal of femininity in the *Legend of Zelda* series and offer a partial critique of the portrayal of women in popular video games as a whole.

II. Link

Link is the main character of the Legend of Zelda series, the familiar green-capped hero known by many even if they do not know him by name. He is sometimes confused with the titular character, Zelda, as it is assumed that the series is named after this central protagonist. Link is typically depicted as a young Hylian (a pointy-eared race within the Zelda universe, generally interchangeable with humans other than this one distinct feature) of average height and build. (Fig. 1). His age varies throughout the series, appearing somewhere between nine years old at his youngest in titles like Wind Waker and Ocarina of Time and eighteen at his oldest in Breath of the Wild (not including the 100 years of sleep in that particular storyline, since he was not physically or mentally aging during that time.)



Fig. 1. Ocarina of Time Link Concept Art. 2013, *Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia*.

However, despite being the central protagonist of the series and the only playable character (other than a few sections of games still primarily devoted to Link), Link is arguably one of the weakest main characters in the Zelda series, writing-wise—keeping in mind that a “strong” character is not equated with physical strength or lack of emotion. While Link is a likeable character in his own right and has more obvious characterization in certain installments of the series, he often lacks concrete characterization in order to remain more “relatable” to the player controlling his character throughout the game. In fact, “Link,” for many players, is not even referred to by name while playing the games. Instead, at the beginning of every game except for *Breath of the Wild*, players are given the option to input their own name (or any other name they would like to use) for the character otherwise known as “Link.” Throughout the game, when other characters refer to the player character, they will call him by the player’s chosen name. Link’s characterization mostly comes down to the actions that he takes and what little others say of him. Naturally, he is presumed to have some motivation to act as the hero, though it is often not explicitly described. Outside of that, he has very little characterization. He’s generally mild-mannered, has tendencies towards sleeping in, and is fearless when it comes to adventure—Character traits that many people could relate to, or at least aspire to. According to the Legend of Zelda Encyclopedia’s entry on the character, “Most incarnations of Link are little more than ordinary Hylians who, through fate and a moment of courage, reawaken as the chosen hero” (Gelinas 18).

His lack of defining personality and the fact that he starts out as just a “normal” person, makes him easy for the player to project themselves onto and relate with. Link is fundamentally designed to be a character that the player can see themselves in: He is

more of a “blank slate” character, a character “defined more by their role... and gear by than their appearance or personality” (Rogers 99). Unlike other games where the player might be there specifically to play the role of a certain person, games centered around blank-slate characters allow the player to project themselves or any personality they desire onto the character that they are controlling. Oftentimes, players care about these characters not because they are particularly compelling on their own, but because each player is able to construct a personal narrative surrounding the character that they are controlling. This, for many people, can be a part of the fun with video games in contrast to other forms of media entertainment.

To further this idea of Link as a “blank slate,” Link also canonically speaks very little, to the point where some fans even go as far as to consider him to be mute. His dialogue prompts are often highly limited and have little to no effect on the game, if any. In most instances, the dialogue options are for the benefit of the player (Fig. 1). in order to prompt the game to give them information or resources. In other instances, Link’s dialogue options may show slightly more personality, but are often still very brief and do not overall affect gameplay. (Fig. 2). Even in games that are fully voice-acted (namely, Breath of the Wild,) Link has no dialogue of his own outside of the grunts and yells that he’s known for, and written dialogue options only serve to offer the player some variety, usually still resulting in more or less the same responses from non-player characters. (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Merchant Dialogue in Breath of the Wild. *ResearchGate*, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Simple-Choice-Dialogue-menu-in-The-Legend-of-Zelda-Breath-of-the-Wild-Nintendo-2017_fig1_328215976.



Fig. 3. Plot Dialogue in Skyward Sword. *IGN Boards*, <https://www.ignboards.com/threads/wishlist-for-zelda-wii-u.454082163>.



Fig. 4. Personality Dialogue in Breath of the Wild. *Quora*, <https://qph.fs.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-9e2b77be6ecb81ad9566cdf798dba41f>.

That being said, Link doesn't tend to voice opinions or motivations of his own. Shigeru Miyamoto has said that he created Link as a silent character because it better allowed the player to feel as if they were the ones driving the story. In a 1989 interview, he said:

“I think having the protagonist speak alienates the player. He's playing as though the character is an extension of himself, so why is his avatar suddenly speaking of its own accord? He'll be struck with the realization that the character he's been thinking of as himself up until now is actually someone else entirely. Having the protagonist speak for himself and decide on his own which way the story goes would make players uncomfortable.” (Rumphol-Janc, “Shigeru Miyamoto and Yuji Horii”).

In *Breath of the Wild*, however, where all the other members of the main cast are fully voice-acted, Link's quiet nature is actually brought up within the story rather than just being a byproduct of game design. In that game, the player can find and read diary entries written from Zelda's perspective, in which she describes a conversation where Link

expressed why he tends to be so quiet. According to Zelda, Link himself says that he's grown quiet over time because of the sheer weight of responsibility that he has as Zelda's sworn knight. This characterization stands in stark contrast to Link in most other iterations of the game, where he offers little to no reflection on his responsibilities or the stress they might cause.

Link is also physically designed to be somewhat more of a gender-neutral character. This allows any player, regardless of their own gender, to see themselves in his position, and to play the game as if they themselves were the Hero. Eiji Aonuma, producer and designer of the Zelda series, notably affirmed this idea in an interview in which he discussed Link's androgyny. He said:

“Back during the Ocarina of Time days, I wanted Link to be gender neutral. I wanted the player to think ‘Maybe Link is a boy or a girl.’ If you saw Link as a guy, he'd have more of a feminine touch. Or vice versa, if you related to Link as a girl, it was with more of a masculine aspect. I really wanted the designer to encompass more of a gender-neutral figure. So I've always thought that for either female or male players, I wanted them to be able to relate to Link.” (Peckham, “Androgynous By Design”)

Link is a character fundamentally designed to be accessible by any player, regardless of their own gender. Though it makes him somewhat vaguely written, it is a strong choice from a game design perspective, especially in a market which is typically not especially welcoming to non-masculine players.

There are some notable exceptions to this “blank slate” rule, and to the norm that Link does not typically reflect on his experiences in the game. In the game *Legend of*

Zelda: Twilight Princess, Link has a slightly more fleshed out character, as seen through his personal conflicts throughout the game. Also as a part of his character being much more clearly defined, he also in turn appears more masculine in design. (Fig. 5). Not only is this *Twilight Princess* version of Link more well-rounded than some other iterations of his character, but *Twilight Princess* also serves to add some depth to previous incarnations of the character as well. In this installment of the game, players get introduced to the idea of the *Hero's Shade* or *Hero's Spirit*. This character appears in the form of a skeletal warrior that can take the form of a white wolf, and he expresses feelings of grief and loss at the idea of having failed the kingdom and failed to pass on his teachings. In order to cope with his failure, this skeletal warrior acts in his afterlife, passing on new skills to Link that the player can then use in combat.

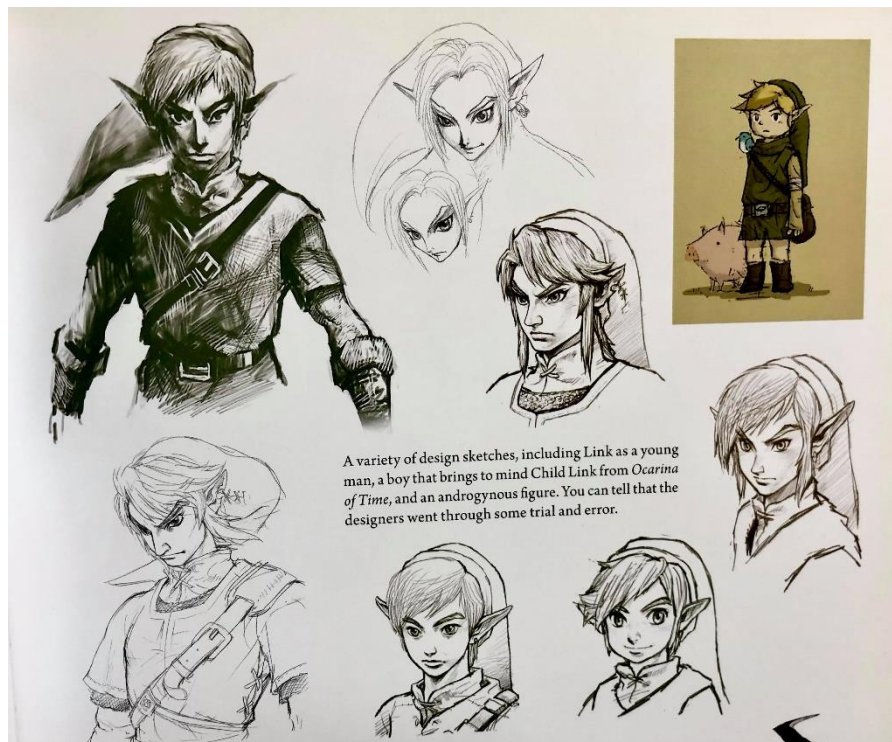


Fig. 5. *Twilight Princess* Link Concept Art. 2013, *Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia*.

According to the lore, this skeletal warrior is actually Link from *Ocarina of Time*. This version of the character is shown to be coping with the effects of loss from the events of that game, where Link, the Hero of Time (in that story) moves back and forth between childhood and adulthood in order to defeat Ganondorf. When his mission is finished as an adult, he is sent back to his childhood to a timeline where those events do not again occur in the future. Thus, his skills are not needed while he is alive and are not then passed on, which only allows for new evils to take residence in Hyrule once he, the Hero of Time, passes away.

This character helps to flesh out not only the “Hero of Time” version of Link from *Ocarina of Time*, but also helps to give a broader understanding of the pressure that Link is under as this reincarnated hero. The pressure that Link feels is touched on in other games, like the aforementioned *Breath of the Wild*, as well as other games like *Wind Waker*, in which Link’s childhood innocence is threatened by Ganondorf’s looming evil. For the most part, Link is an adventurer—He is generally unhindered by the expectations associated with being a member of the royal family, or of an ancient tribe dedicated to protecting the royal family, as Zelda and Impa are (respectively.) On the contrary, he usually begins each game living a simple and unremarkable life. However, in these versions of the game where more of his personal response to responsibility is explored, it is notable that he takes a somewhat masculine approach (stoicism) not necessarily because it was originally intended to be a part of his design, but because because it explained an aspect of his character that existed because he was meant to be a more expressionless figure for players to project onto. Link’s overall lack of defining

personality allows him to interact in unique ways with his gender expression, and in a way allows for the story to center more around the stronger female cast.

Link is not a “weak” character because he is not masculine or defined heavily in terms of masculinity. On the contrary, he exhibits many of the “desirable” traits of masculinity. He is physically strong, for one, as he is an extraordinary swordsman as well as he is talented with jumping, climbing, archery, horseback riding, and many other physical skills. Additionally, he is presumed to be fairly intelligent, as the player (through him) solves many different types of puzzles and problems in order to progress through the game. Most notably, as the representative for the Triforce of Courage, he is also well known for his bravery. All of these can be traits associated positively with masculinity and are traits that Link embodies. However, he is still not as “strong” of a character as some other characters in the series due to the fact that he is, character-wise, not as developed as some of the other personalities in the series, especially in comparison to some of the notable female characters like Zelda.

III. Zelda

Princess Zelda of Hyrule is the titular character of the series, though she is not the central protagonist. She is also a Hylian, a humanoid race defined by their pointy ears, and has blonde hair and blue or green eyes. (Fig. 6). Her age typically more or less matches Link's in each installment of the series, if not a year or two older than him, making her around nine or ten in her younger iterations like Ocarina of Time and Wind Waker and eighteen to twenty in her older versions, like in Twilight Princess. She is a member of the royal family of Hyrule, the daughter of the king of Hyrule. Though, like Link, she is young, she has a divine connection to the gods and the spirit realm which allow her to provide wisdom and insight that others do not typically possess.

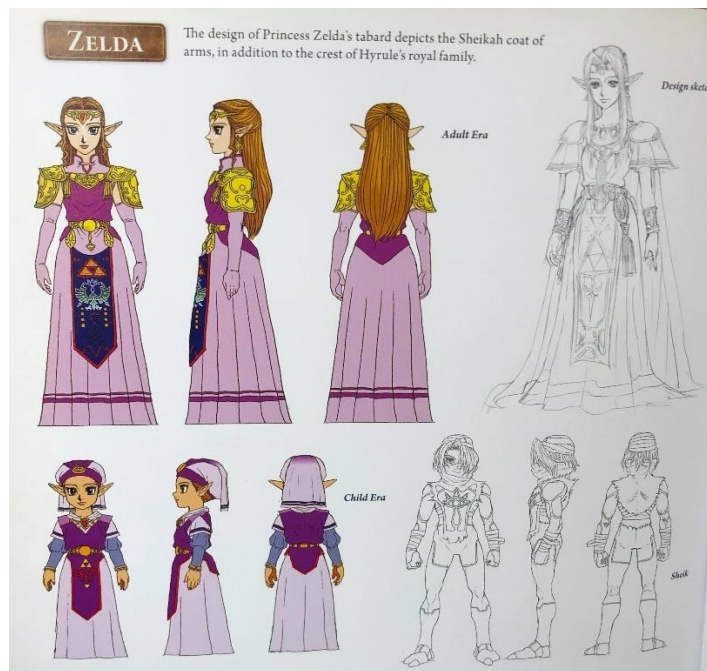


Fig. 6. Ocarina of Time Princess Zelda Concept Art. 2013, *Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia*.

While every iteration of Link is a hero chosen by the goddess, every iteration of Zelda is the mortal incarnation of the goddess herself. The Hyrule encyclopedia describes that, "Like 'Link,' 'Zelda' is a name that has been given to many individuals over time.

The fabled princess of Hyrule has played a key role in ensuring balance is maintained in Hyrule throughout history. She is the goddess Hylia reborn and wields great power that she uses to keep evil in check” (Gelinias 16). From her power as Hylia reborn, she has a variety of abilities throughout the series, including (among other things) the ability to heal allies, restrain enemies, and see glimpses of the future. Her connection with the divine also allows her to occasionally be gifted physical items, such as the Bow of Light, which is seen in a handful of titles in which the princess aids Link more directly in his final battle against evil. In terms of abilities, it could certainly be argued that Zelda is far more powerful than Link. While Link has a very broad skillset and is able to use a variety of tools and abilities, as well as having some protection and power granted to him as a wielder of the Triforce of Courage, he lacks the raw potential that Zelda has in many versions of the game.

In addition to her abilities, Zelda is also a much stronger character than Link in terms of her writing. She typically has a much more in-depth personality than Link, as she is not a character that is left up to interpretation as he is but is an established character in her own right. While her personality can be somewhat stifled by responsibility in iterations of the game where her primary role is solely to be the princess locked away in the castle, there are titles where her personality shows through much more vividly. Often, it shows through when she is not beholden to the responsibilities of “Zelda,” and has taken on some alternate identity.

In *Wind Waker*, the kingdom of Hyrule has been flooded with water, and Zelda does not even remember her connection to the throne. She goes by a new name entirely, Tetra, and is sailing as the captain of a band of pirates. It is not revealed until nearly the

end of the game that Tetra is actually Princess Zelda. Tetra, who has not been burdened by the responsibilities of being a princess or of being a wielder of the Triforce, has been able to choose her own path. In contrast to some more refined versions of her character, Tetra is tan, styles her hair up and out of her face, wears pants and a red bandana, and carries a sword. She can be harsh and stubborn but is still ultimately kindhearted and helps Link when he's in need. While she has accepted the responsibility of being the captain of her ship, it is something that she has chosen to do and enjoys doing.

In a sense, Tetra in *Wind Waker* represents who Zelda might be if she was not beholden to tradition, and the story reflects this. *Wind Waker* is one iteration of the series in which Link and Zelda are both quite young, only around nine years old, and when it comes to the final battle, they actually receive help from an adult so that they might be allowed to live out their lives as the children that they are. Once the “evil” has been defeated, the two are able to return to their lives almost as if nothing had happened, sailing off in search of further adventures together.

Tetra is not the only alternative form that Zelda takes. In *Ocarina of Time*, she takes another form as well, though this she does intentionally. In order to hide from Ganondorf and to help guide Link as he tries to find a way to defeat Ganondorf, Princess Zelda takes the form of Sheik, a muscular young man and member of the Sheikah tribe—a group that specializes in athleticism, magic, and combat in order to protect the Hyrule family. Sheik appears on occasion to impart wisdom to Link in *Ocarina of Time*: guiding him and teaching him new skills, even fighting alongside him at one point. While modern iterations of this character have taken on more explicitly feminine appearances, Sheik originally was very masculine in build and was referred to with masculine pronouns

while in that form. (Fig. 7). In addition, this “male” form of Zelda in Ocarina of Time is shown to have physical abilities that Zelda in her “true” form does not seem to possess, as shown later in her escape from the castle before the final battle. While Sheik was capable of incredible athletic feats, jumping from impossible heights and disappearing without a trace, Zelda exhibits none of these abilities after returning to her form as a princess.



Fig. 7. Official Artwork of Sheik. *Zeldapedia*, <https://zelda-archive.fandom.com/wiki/Sheik>.

While it is never explicitly explained whether Zelda simply altered her appearance or if she actually became a man (in a sense) for this period of time in order to hide her identity, it nevertheless introduces an interesting dilemma of the ways in which Zelda changes when she’s perceived as a man versus when she’s perceived as a woman.

Once she's perceived as a woman again, she is almost immediately captured, and apparently has no means of escape despite the aforementioned physical ability that her more masculine form was capable of. She reverts back to being the "damsel," and for the most part acts helpless, in need of Link's aid.

Despite her great deal of power and her strong personality in some of the titles of the series, Zelda typically still gets relegated to the "damsel in distress" role: Someone who must be protected, and if not protected, rescued. In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, Trépanier-Jobin remarks of the princess-rescue plot in *Super Mario Brothers*, another title created by Nintendo, saying, "This princess-rescue plot device perpetuates the old stereotype of a helpless, passive, and gorgeous damsel in distress saved from a perilous situation by a masculine hero. This millennia-old archetype can be traced back to ancient Greek legends such as Andromeda's, as well as to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century folktales such as *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*" (Trépanier-Jobin 92). This damsel-in-distress plot has drawn increased attention as the series moves into a modern era. Some fans (especially fans of the original game) might argue that the damsel plot is either acceptable due to a difference in cultural gender norms from the country of origin (Japan), or even that the damsel plot is essential to the structure of a *Zelda* game due to the correlated nostalgia from the original game. However, continually limiting Princess Zelda to a passive and repetitive role solely as the damsel in distress is severely limiting the full capability of the *Zelda* series' otherwise contrite and overdone stories, which could be explored in much more interesting and dynamic ways if the characters were allowed to explore new and unique roles.

Furthermore, insinuating that the game cannot or should not evolve past this set of stereotypical roles for the sake of adhering to a set of specific cultural gender norms is a shallow excuse to cling to the past, as *Nintendo* and by extension the *Zelda* series has grown to be an international hit, with designers, artists, writers, and other creators contributing to the series from across the globe. Additionally, even if feminism in the *Zelda* series were to be analyzed solely in terms of Japanese gender norms, Japanese women have made massive strides for equality over the past 35 years since the original game's release, arguing for recognition as more than just passive mothers and wives. The forefront of the Japanese feminist movement even as far back as the 1970s, years before the release of the first *Zelda* game, was defined by women seeking "self-expression, self-affirmation, self-realization, self-determination, and self-emancipation" (Matsui 435). To assume that the *Zelda* series, and Princess Zelda as a character, is incapable of moving past this "damsel" plotline because of the cultural limitations of Japanese gender norms ultimately is a failure to recognize the work of Japanese feminists seeking to insert agency into their own lives. While the *Zelda* series is only one outlet of artistic expression, and it has also as previously mentioned been heavily influenced by international ideals, it is important to recognize that the limitations of Princess Zelda (and any of the characters in the series, for that matter) is not adherent to what came before. "Zelda" is not a real person: She is only limited by what the writers of this series are willing to allow her to be capable of. The writers may make whatever excuse they wish to explain why Zelda is weak when she is wearing a dress and not when she is disguised as a Sheikah man or wearing boyish pirate clothes, but ultimately it is the decision of the writers to write her this way and excuse it after the fact.

However, Zelda certainly is not powerless, even when she must wait for her knight in shining armor. Especially in more recent iterations of the game, Princess Zelda has gained a lot more of a central role in the story and a lot more agency as an actor within it. In *Wind Waker*, although her identity as Zelda is not revealed until nearly the end, her presence throughout the game and her contributions to it show her to be involved in the story as more than just a damsel. Tetra helps Link on multiple occasions and is essentially implied to be on an adventure of her own, entirely independent from Link's, though their fates are ultimately intertwined. In other games, while she may not have a physical presence throughout a majority of the gameplay, she often still aids him in some way and will occasionally help him fight in the final battle. As the series has evolved from the original games, where the characters and plot were markedly shallower, Zelda and Link's current relationship as characters does not solely revolve around Link needing to rescue Zelda, but often a mutually beneficial relationship of helping one another.

Additionally (though she does, admittedly, still need rescuing by the end) *Wind Waker* portrays another of the series' strengths: while in the first few *Legend of Zelda* games, the Princess served as a sort of prize to be won at the end—a maiden which the hero would save and then marry to become royalty himself—this is no longer the norm within the modern *Zelda* series. While some plots have a much more explicit romance (like *Skyward Sword*) in other titles like *Wind Waker* they are only ever friends even when they choose to adventure together at the end of the game. Zelda is not a prize to be won, she does not owe anything to Link, even when she is rescued by him. In *Twilight Princess*, they have an almost exclusively business relationship, with the much more mature pair essentially parting ways and returning to their separate lives after the events

of the game. Even in *Skyward Sword*, where the two of them have a more clearly defined romance, this romance does not originate from the events of the game. They are already romantically interested in one another before the story takes place, and becoming a couple is a natural conclusion to their storyline once Zelda is safe. He does not “earn” her affection by saving her, he saves her because they already care for one another.

Though Zelda serves mainly as motivation and support for Link throughout most of the games, typically as the maiden in need of rescuing, she is not a weak character by means of power or in terms of writing. Zelda represents traditional feminine strengths. Her femininity is associated with divine power and wisdom. In a way, she is relegated to the “home,” where she is responsible for protecting others by being a wise decision-maker rather than by physically fighting or going out into the world to adventure (as Link does). Her role is important, and oft overlooked, or even reduced to being “useless” or “unproductive” despite arguably doing more work than the main character, Link, who is allowed to have the free time to partake in things that he enjoys, as the player controlling him is allowed to take time to explore, play mini games, fish, and do other tasks otherwise irrelevant to resolving the main conflict. Zelda spends the games not just as a captive, but in a position of responsibility. When she is “trapped” in *Breath of the Wild* for example, it is because she is putting all of her strength towards holding off a world-ending Calamity until Link is strong enough to defeat it with her help. Zelda may not be able to defeat evil alone, but neither is Link. The two of them must work together, and overlooking the strengths that Zelda brings to the story simply because her strengths are not typically “masculine” is an injustice to her character. Zelda does not need to be “fixed” by making her take up Link’s role as a master swordsman and combatant. Zelda

needs to be developed and improved as a character by allowing her more agency and removing her from the repetitive role as the damsel in distress, even if she still maintains her more feminine strengths as a representative of wisdom.

IV. Impa

While not appearing in every iteration of the series, Impa is a popular recurring character. Impa is another member of the mysterious Sheikah clan. Unlike Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf, although “Impa” is seen in multiple games, she is not a reincarnation of the same figure, as the other three are. Instead, Impa is a name given to a Sheikah who is chosen—or fated—to protect Princess Zelda (and who will often inevitably aid Link as well.) As stated in the *Zelda Encyclopedia*, “Sheikah women named Impa, all chosen to protect Zelda and help Link, have appeared as early as the earliest known story in the timeline, *Skyward Sword*” (Gelinias 44). Like most Sheikah, she usually has light blonde or white hair, tan skin, and red or brown eyes. She is a somewhat more androgynous character, though this can vary through different iterations of her design. Sometimes, she is a tall, athletic woman. Other times, she is a small, elderly lady.

Impa alternates between two main roles in the games—mainly depending on who in the story she’s serving—and her design changes accordingly. When Impa’s purpose in the story is primarily to serve Princess Zelda, who is perceived as fragile and in need of protection, Impa takes on a more masculine and powerful appearance in order to serve as the “guardian” role. Alternatively, when her primary function in the story is to serve Link, who is physically capable of fighting for himself although he may lack some knowledge of the world around him, Impa tends to appear in her more feminine form: An elderly woman, who is able to impart her wisdom onto Link. Depending on the game, or the shifting purpose of her character within a given game, the intentionality of her character and the associated design may change, as it does in *Skyward Sword*. She serves

both roles in that game, one as Princess Zelda's guardian when she is young (Fig. 8), and the other as a source of information for Link when she is old (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8. Young Impa in Skyward Sword. *Zeldapedia*, <https://zelda.fandom.com/wiki/Impa>.



Fig. 9. Old Woman Impa in Skyward Sword. *Puissance Zelda*, https://www.puissance-zelda.com/15-Skyward_Sword/solution/318-La_Foret_de_Firone.

On one hand, Impa the warrior tends to lean towards a masculine presentation, or at least a more androgynous presentation. She tends to have either short hair or hair styled up tightly and has a boxier build in these iterations of the game. In Ocarina of Time, she is a visibly muscular character and wears some kind of plate armor. (Fig. 10). In Skyward Sword, she is less muscular but more androgynous, with shorter hair and a leaner, flatter physique. When Impa is serving more as a “warrior” or a “protector” than she is as a sage, she tends to be aiding Zelda by physically protecting her, whether that’s by holding off enemies or helping her escape. This version of Impa serves less of a feminine role, primarily serving instead as a masculine presence, one that Princess Zelda presumably needs when Link or some other male character is not there to guard her.



Fig. 10. Official Ocarina of Time Impa Artwork. *Zeldapedia*, <https://zelda.fandom.com/wiki/Impa>.

On the other hand, Impa’s role towards Link tends almost exclusively to embody that of the “sage.” While she also serves this role for Zelda, passing on wisdom and knowledge to the Princess, she does *not* protect Link the way that she protects the Princess. Where Zelda is often placed in a role of needing to be protected, Link is

presumed to be independent enough to be able to defend himself and protect others. He is not lacking in physical ability, and therefore Impa's purpose in relation to Link has nothing to do with physically protecting him. Instead, she serves solely to pass on her knowledge to him (and by extension, pass her knowledge to the player.) In times where her primary role is to serve as Link's aid and not Zelda's, Impa's design changes drastically. When she serves Link, she tends to appear as an elderly woman, presumably who no longer has the same fighting ability. For example, in *Breath of the Wild*, where Zelda is beyond Impa's reach and her only function in the story is to pass her knowledge on to Link, Impa appears as an old, sagging woman with missing teeth and visible age. (Fig. 11). Though she is not the beautiful and fair damsel that Princess Zelda may be, she nonetheless represents femininity in this form in contrast to her more masculine or androgynous form. Additionally, in *Skyward Sword*, though Impa appears in both her younger, athletic form and her elderly, grandmotherly form, her interactions with Link while she is young are limited to short interactions and battle sequences. Instead, she spends most of her time with Zelda, protecting her. On the other hand, her older form (who is not revealed to be Impa until later on, and until that point is referred to as the "Old Woman") is a character that Link can interact with on a regular basis to seek knowledge and advice.



Fig. 11. Impa in Breath of the Wild. *Gameranx*, <https://gameranx.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2017030611174000-F1C11A22FAEE3B82F21B330E1B786A39.jpg>

While Impa does not embody femininity in the well-recognized sense of a young, fertile woman, she still maintains some aspects of her womanhood in both of her forms. Even though Impa physically takes on a much less feminine appearance when she serves as the “protector”, she is still also a wise mentor and has knowledge to pass on to both Link and Princess Zelda. Wisdom in the *Zelda* series tends to be associated with femininity, with Princess Zelda—in a sense, the most traditional “feminine” figure in the series—representing the embodiment of wisdom as the wielder of the Triforce of Wisdom. She embodies this femininity even further when her role is solely to exist as a giver of wisdom. The archetype of the “wise old woman” is in itself another aspect of the “feminine,” not to be overlooked. In pagan mythos, femininity is split into three phases as the maiden, the mother, and the crone, which each embody one phase of a woman’s life. (Urban 166). A woman is no less a woman when she has aged out of her youth.

In many appearances, the archetypical “wise old woman” is “a seer, encourager and advisor to those who have responded to the Call to Adventure” (Bubel 1) as Impa is for Link in this form.

However, this duality of Impa as the strong, androgynous protector versus Impa as the wise, unassuming elderly sage still exist in contrast to one another within the context of the game. The juxtaposition suggests a unique understanding of her character’s purpose. Unlike most female characters in the Legend of Zelda series, Impa when she is young is allowed to be a physically strong woman and skilled warrior. However, when she does serve that role, not only does she serve it only to protect another female character, but she is also then designed to be distinctly *less feminine*. On the other hand, when she is primarily a sage, she is allowed to be more “feminine,” in a traditional sense. Her clothes become more akin to dresses and skirts, her hair is longer, and she gives off a “grandmotherly” vibe, in stark contrast to her intimidating and commanding presence as a warrior in other designs. While as a sage she represents the “wise old woman” or “crone” figure, as a warrior she fits much less into feminine archetypes.

Unlike Link, whose androgyny serves the purpose of leaving him more of a neutral canvas for the player to project themselves onto, Impa’s androgyny tells a different story. Impa’s androgyny tends to imply that in order to be physically strong, in order to be a warrior, one must not be “feminine.” While she is still clearly a female character and maintains some aspects of her femininity such as her wisdom, when she serves her role as a warrior she loses much of her feminine side. This is not to say that Impa’s design is bad because she has more of a square build, nor that her design would be inherently stronger if she were hourglass shaped and had long, flowing hair. In fact, it

would be reasonable to say that she is actually well designed for the role that she serves as a fighter and warrior. However, when comparing Impa to the other female characters within the series, most notably those who are not skilled with combat, it is notable how Impa tends to appear much more masculine.

When we examine Impa alongside Zelda, it becomes clear that this association of masculinity and strength is not an isolated occurrence. Though it is contrasted in part by different characters such as the Gerudo tribe, who exist as beautiful and mysterious women highly capable in combat, Zelda and Impa portray a dichotomy that suggests a choice: A person can be strong and capable, or they can be feminine. They do not exist in harmony. When Zelda is in her Sheik form, she is capable of incredible feats of strength and agility, all immediately lost upon her return to her form as the Princess. When Impa is young and dedicated to serving Zelda, she is strong enough to be designated singularly responsible for Zelda's safety, but she loses much of this strength when her role revolves around being a feminine sage instead. Her design is aged drastically, and she is more often shown sitting and waiting for things to happen rather than acting as an agent of change herself.

Impa is a step forward in presenting women who are physically capable, but she still presents a limitation on the perception of femininity. She still exists within a binary, as either strong and masculine or feminine and fragile. Additionally, her portrayal relies heavily on where she fits within an understanding of gender roles: If Zelda needs her, she needs a manly guardian. If Link needs her, she can't be manly, lest she challenge his own masculinity. Nevertheless, Impa's ability to maintain some of her femininity while serving in the more "masculine" role, her ability in a more masculine role in the first

place despite being a woman, and her ability to go back and forth between these more “feminine” and “masculine” roles, shows an overall positive portrayal of women without defining womanhood to any singular expected role.

V. Conclusion

Video games are a unique genre. Unlike most other forms of media, passively consumed by the audience, they depict a story in which the audience has some aspect of control. For a brief period, they are transported to another world and are able to take up another identity. Whether or not that world is an attempted mirror of our own, a high fantasy escape, or a rough-and-tumble hellscape rife with monsters and combat, the ways in which the characters and interactions of those worlds are written nonetheless in part portray and influence how we understand our relationship to the real world we live in. There is no true separation of reality from the fantasies that our reality generates.

This becomes complicated when considering the history of video games. A broad understanding of their role as a form of media has become heavily associated with the fact that they are correlated so heavily with the male gaze and sexist fantasy. In other words:

“Feminism is a messy topic for video games. Video games were long seen as a kind of ‘boys’ club’ wherein men and boys defined the industry. From the late 1980s through the 1990s, video games were primarily made by men for masculine audiences. In turn, early feminist critiques of video games have long focused on the problematic representations of female bodies, such as Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series (1996-present) and other characters primarily made for a presumed male gaze” (Chess 93).

Because of this, many women feel as if video games are not intended for them, and therefore have no interest in trying to contribute towards reshaping them. If anything, women only avoid video games more because of the surrounding “boys club” culture and

the derisory portrayal of gender within the games themselves. As a woman, it can be exhausting to have one's existence repeatedly diminished to being either a helpless damsel or a suave seductress, and nothing more.

The *Zelda* series is, perhaps, a step towards bridging that gap. Though the main character is still male, and appears to the “boys club” aspect, his more neutral gender portrayal allows him to be an approachable character for any player to engage with. In addition, though perhaps rife with outdated stereotypes, the women in the *Zelda* series are engaging and have only grown stronger as the series has progressed. When analyzing women in media, in games, and when calling for “strong female characters,” we don't just need women who are physically capable and reject their femininity. We need female characters with agency, who have complex emotions, who are allowed to be flawed, and who despite all of this still have a contributing role in the story. The *Zelda* series has the potential for all of these things—And if one of the most well-loved classics is capable of changing to have better portrayals of its female characters, then maybe the whole game industry can change for the better, too.

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